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DE RUEHLM #0522/01 1331128
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FM AMEMBASSY COLOMBO
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 9964
INFO RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 1177
RUEHTH/AMEMBASSY ATHENS 0253
RUEHBK/AMEMBASSY BANGKOK 3823
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA 1657
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 8659
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 6894
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 4965
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 3023
RUEHNW/AMEMBASSY OSLO 4926
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 4032
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI 9285
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI 6592
RUEHON/AMCONSUL TORONTO 1133
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS
RUEHG/USMISSION GENEVA 3513
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC
RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
RHMFIU/CDRUSARPAC FT SHAFTER HI//APCW/APOP//
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI//J3/J332/J52//

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SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

STATE FOR SCA (BOUCHER), SCA/INS AND PRM
STATE ALSO PASS USAID
AID/W FOR ANE/SCA, DCHA/FFP (DWORKEN, KSHEIN)
AID/W FOR DCHA/OFDA (MORRISP, ACONVERY, RTHAYER, RKERR)
ATHENS FOR PCARTER
BANGKOK FOR USAID/DCHA/OFDA (WBERGER)
KATHMANDU FOR USAID/DCHA/OFDA AND POL (SBERRY)
GENEVA FOR RMA (NKYLOH, NHILGERT, MPITOTTI)
USUN NEW YORK FOR ECOSOC (D MERCADO)
SECDEF FOR OSD - POLICY
PACOM ALSO FOR J-5

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PREF](#) [MOPS](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [ASEC](#) [CE](#)
SUBJECT: Northern Sri Lanka SitRep 71

REF: A) Colombo 519 B) Colombo 514 C) Colombo 507 D) Colombo 501 E)
Colombo 492 F) Colombo 484 G) Colombo 477 H) Colombo 470 I) Colombo
469 J) Colombo 464 K) Colombo 459 and previous

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Despite indications from within the safe zone that the trapped civilian population might attempt to escape on May 12-13, a large-scale exodus had not materialized as of 4 pm local time on May 13. Charge and Defense Attaché liaised with Government officials and with contacts in the safe zone in the evening of May 12 in an effort to facilitate safe passage. As the Sri Lankan Army pushed southward within the conflict zone in recent days, the trapped civilian population has moved further southward. Publicly available satellite imagery suggests that shelling may have caused the move. A renewed ICRC attempt on May 13 to deliver food and evacuate wounded by sea was again forced to turn back for lack of security guarantees. The makeshift hospital in the conflict zone was hit for a third time by artillery fire, reportedly causing numerous casualties. Another ICRC local staff member was killed in the "safe zone." END SUMMARY.

NO OVERNIGHT EXODUS

¶2. (SBU) At about 1945 on May 12, Defense Attaché (DATT) received a report via a UN contact citing an INGO local staffmember in the safe zone who reported a significant number of civilians moving southwards within the safe zone. The local staff contact relayed that civilians were willing to fight the LTTE in order to escape.

This contact said more civilians would join the escape attempt, if shelling were to stop long enough for them to feel safe enough to leave their shelters.

¶13. (SBU) DATT conveyed the message to a senior Sri Lankan Army officer, who said UAV coverage had observed the large number of civilians moving south. DATT suggested a pause of several hours might give the IDPs the encouragement they need to break free. The military's Security Forces HQ-Wanni asked that the message be passed back through the INGO to civilians in the NFZ that a breakout should wait until dawn, when it would be safer than at night, because soldiers could better distinguish between civilians and LTTE cadres.

Further, SFHQ-Wanni recommended the safest escape route would be west to the Nanthi Kadal lagoon, then south along the shore for a link-up with security forces.

¶14. (SBU) Charge immediately phoned Presidential Advisor Basil Rajapaksa, who said he was unaware of the apparently large number of civilians moving south in the safe zone. Charge urged that the military exercise maximum restraint to protect civilians and that they avoid heavy shelling, as this could cause large numbers of casualties as the civilians tried to move. Rajapaksa undertook to convey this and assured there "would be no firing by the GSL." He phoned back about 30 minutes later to report that he had spoken with Chief of Defense Staff Donald Perera and Presidential Secretary (NSA equivalent) Lalith Weeratunga and relayed the U.S. concern about civilian casualties.

¶15. (SBU) An Air Force contact told Defense Attaché on May 13 that UAVs had detected a large movement of civilians southward in the

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"safe zone" during the day on May 11, but nothing significant on the night of May 12. The SLAF said there was no evidence of widespread dismantling of shelters. The Air Force said there are generally two concentrations of IDPs, in the southwest corner of the "safe zone" and generally in the middle. UAV coverage indicated 58 Division had not reached the ICRC's new landing site. The source said two groups of 40-50 civilians escaped in the southern area of the NFZ the previous night, May 12.

¶16. (SBU) Charge spoke with Senior Presidential Advisor Basil Rajapaksa again on May 13 and stressed the urgency of government forces holding their fire and creating conditions under which food could be unloaded from the ICRC-flagged "Green Ocean" and sick and wounded civilians boarded. Rajapaksa claimed that fighting was not taking place near the landing point, but rather inland, toward the lagoon and that the sick and wounded civilians were on the beach waiting to leave. He said the government had asked the ICRC to authorize unloading of food and loading of civilians onto small boats by fishermen, who were standing by and ready to assist. Charge reiterated that it is the military's responsibility to ensure security conditions under which emergency humanitarian operations could take place and emphasized that time was of the essence for today's ICRC operation. He also noted the President's April 27 pledge that combat operations had ended and heavy weapons would not be used. Rajapaksa undertook to speak to the Eastern Navy Commander and other military officials to convey our urgent concerns about conditions that would permit food to be put ashore today and wounded civilians to be evacuated.

SIGNIFICANT ACTIVITY IN CONFLICT ZONE

¶17. (SBU) Sri Lankan Army contacts reported 59 Division withstood an LTTE counterattack last night, May 12, near the point where the Nanthi Kadal lagoon outlet reaches the sea. The Army said the LTTE attacked from the west and the north on land. Three Sea Tiger suicide craft exploded when they hit the beach. Casualties on both sides were high. 58 Division advanced southward about 600m last night and 53 Division about 300m. The Army expressed confidence that operations would conclude "in a day or two." The Army contact assured us that 53, 58, and 59 Divisions had been cautioned to exercise restraint should civilians attempt a large exodus from the conflict zone. He reported that about 40 civilians escaped on the morning of May 13 and 8 more on the night of May 12. (Note: The UN

Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reports 1,000 who filed the conflict zone since May 11 are now in transit to Omanthai.)

¶18. (SBU) Navy contacts reported that three Sea Tiger suicide craft emerged from the conflict zone on the night of May 12. The SLN vessels engaged them. The Sea Tigers moved south at high speed until they rammed into the beach near 59 Division. All three detonated in a massive explosion, the Navy said, but caused little damage due to the location on the beach. Separately, one boatload of civilians managed to escape the NFZ. Our Navy contact opined that operations could take more than a couple of days, because troops are entering built-up areas where the fighting will be more difficult.

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CIVILIAN POPULATION MOVES SOUTH

¶19. (SBU) Publicly available satellite imagery and multiple Embassy sources substantiate reports that the civilian population trapped in the conflict zone suddenly moved southward on the weekend of May 9-10, though still generally within the area the Government has defined as a "safe zone." Advocacy groups including Human Rights Watch believe the movement was triggered by an immediate threat to civilians' safety, i.e., shelling in close proximity to the civilian concentration. The Government continues to characterize reports of shelling by Government forces as LTTE propaganda.

¶10. (SBU) Contacts in the conflict zone report that the heaviest fighting is on the northern front. Civilians are moving generally south, trying to escape the most intense firing. Civilians who are lucky enough to have bunkers are hiding in the bunkers. Aid workers believe that casualties are very high, but have no estimate of how many have been killed recently.

¶11. (SBU) The ICRC told us it had been notified on May 12 that there were an estimated 1,000 patients in need of medical evacuation. According to media reports, the hospital was hit again by shellfire on May 13, killing at least 38 civilians. The pro-LTTE website TamilNet also claimed that 39 civilians were killed and 40 wounded in an artillery strike on a women's mental health counseling center.

ICRC FERRY UPDATE

¶12. (SBU) ICRC attempted another food shipment/medical evacuation on May 13, but again faced insecure conditions. As on May 12, the ICRC ship "Green Ocean" stopped its approach as ICRC officials contacted both sides of the conflict to seek a temporary calm in the fighting. If the fighting did not calm by mid-afternoon, ICRC planned to return the ship again to Pulmoddai. At 4:30 pm on May 13, ICRC head Castella reported the ship had turned back without being able to deliver food or evacuate patients because of chaotic conditions at the landing site and nearby firing. He said the government had proposed new evacuation procedure overland but thought it difficult because the route would necessarily cross the front lines. He welcomed the prospect of a face-to-face meeting with the Defense Secretary to discuss this and other issues. He confirmed media reports that the makeshift hospital had been hit by shell fire for a third time. He told us an additional Red Cross local staff member had been killed in the fighting today, May 13.

¶13. (SBU) During the morning of May 13, Charge called Minister of Disaster Management and Human Rights Samarasinghe to express grave concern about the humanitarian consequences of another day's delay in the Green Ocean's operations. Samarasinghe said he was instructed this morning by Defense Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa (who was in a meeting of the Security Council) to provide ICRC Head of Delegation Paul Castella the military's full assurance that there would be no shelling by the Army and food could be off-loaded from the boat and passengers taken aboard. Samarasinghe did so at 10:00

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a.m. Charge noted that, while he could not speak for the ICRC, he was confident the ICRC would have proceeded if security conditions permitted. Samarasinghe suggested to Charge that it would be helpful for Rajapaksa and Castella to meet tomorrow, May 14. Charge agreed that this could be useful, but reiterated that the important thing was to get food into the zone and evacuate patients without further delay.

TNA APPEALS TO GOVERNMENT AND LTTE

¶14. (SBU) The Tamil National Alliance (TNA) held a rare press conference on the evening of May 12 in which they called on the government and the LTTE to stop the killing of civilians in the conflict zone. 12 TNA Members of Parliament (MP) attended, all the TNA MPs currently in Sri Lanka, except one who is still inside the conflict zone. (Note: The remaining ten or so TNA MPs are currently outside of the country, citing concerns for their personal safety.) The MPs aid the government has an obligation to protect 11 of its citizens, including the Tamil civilians tapped by ongoing fighting. Based on reports from doctors inside the conflict zone and from the TNA MP inside the NFZ, they stated that there remain 120,000 to 150,000 civilians inside the conflict zone. The MPs present at the press conference insisted that if the government undertook a humanitarian pause, the TNA would immediately call on the LTTE to allow civilians who wished to leave the conflict zone to depart.

MOORE